Participation Justice in Generative Relational Being

Toward a Theory of Legitimate Participation in Relational Production and Reproduction

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Abstract

Theories of participation ask who should take part in collective decisions, by what procedures, and with what authority. This paper asks whether the question has been posed at the appropriate level. Decisions are episodes within a longer process by which relational structures are produced, sustained, transformed, and dissolved, and the paper considers the possibility that participation in that longer process is what carries the normative weight, with access to the episodes as one form it takes. The paper surveys what the existing literature appears to have settled: the taxonomies of participation from the ladder onward, the three-dimensional decomposition of participatory design, the differentiation of rule levels in commons governance, the principles of democratic inclusion and the boundary problem, and the trilemma that no participatory arrangement escapes. It concedes that much of what a relational theory would seek to establish about who participates, how, and at which stage appears to have been established already, and it attempts to locate the residue. Against that residue it sets a generative relational reading, on which standing to participate may derive from occupying a position within a relational structure whose reproduction is at stake, and on which the sufficiency of participation at any stage may be assessed by a single criterion: whether the arrangement preserves the capacity of the affected relations to generate a further determination. The criterion is offered as a proposal and is stated with its costs. It supplies no allocation formula, it leaves the trilemma unresolved, and it requires a judgement about generative capacity that the paper is unable to operationalize. The closing questions are held to be the more valuable half of what is offered.

Keywords: participation; justice; legitimacy; relational ontology; governance; inclusion; social reproduction; generativity.

A note on the standing of this paper. This is a discussion paper. It identifies a structure, surveys what existing theory has made of it, marks where each account runs out, and proposes a direction. It does not complete a theory. The survey is conducted in an unusually conceding register, because the central questions of this subject are old and well worked, and a paper that failed to say so would be worth less than one that says so first. Where a claim entered here as open is in fact occupied, or where a source has been read wrongly, correction is welcome at `huangwanhong@serendip.ngo`.

1 Introduction

Arrangements for taking part in the shaping of common conditions have become a standard feature of institutional design. Public authorities consult before deciding, firms report to those they call stakeholders, development agencies require the involvement of affected populations, research funders convene panels of lay members, and constitutional reform is increasingly attempted through assemblies of citizens selected by lot. The vocabulary is now common across domains that share little else, and an extensive literature has grown around the question of what such arrangements are worth. That literature has served two purposes. It has supplied instruments of design, by which a body intending to involve others may determine what involving them requires, and it has supplied instruments of criticism, by which arrangements that describe themselves as participatory may be examined and, in a substantial number of cases, found to confer very little. Both achievements are real, and the present paper takes them as its starting point.

Three difficulties nevertheless recur, and together they motivate what follows. The first concerns the level at which the subject is posed. Participation is ordinarily treated as a relation between persons and decisions: there is a body that decides, there are persons upon whom the decision bears, and participation comprises the arrangements by which the second acquire some purchase on the first. Decisions, however, are episodes. They occur within structures of relations that precede them and persist after them, and those structures are sustained by a volume of ordinary activity occurring at a remove from any decision point, so that whether an account pitched at the level of the decision reaches what matters is a question worth posing. The second difficulty concerns a question that is seldom asked. Every arrangement for participation settles three matters before it can operate: who takes part, in what manner and with what weight, and what it is they take part in. The first two have been examined at length, while the third is ordinarily settled by the institutional setting and passed over, so that arrangements are compared by their intensity while the objects over which that intensity is exercised go unexamined. The third difficulty concerns the absence of a criterion of sufficiency. A designer choosing among arrangements faces a question the literature addresses obliquely, namely how much participation, of what kind, at which point, is enough; and since no arrangement admits everyone to everything, some principle is required for judging when a given selection is defensible, where the available principles tend either toward a maximum that cannot be met or toward a description of practice that carries no normative weight.

Five bodies of work bear on these difficulties, and each is treated at length below. Typologies of participation, beginning with the ladder of citizen participation and continuing through several successors, order arrangements by the degree of control they confer, and establish that participation is graded and that low grades may be counterfeit (Arnstein, 1969; Pretty, 1995; White, 1996). A three-dimensional account of participatory design decomposes

arrangements by the scope of participation, the mode of communication and decision, and the extent of authority conferred (Fung, 2006). Institutional analysis of common-pool resources distinguishes operational, collective-choice, and constitutional levels of rules, and associates enduring self-governance with arrangements connecting them (Ostrom, 1990, 2005). Democratic theory has examined at length the ground on which standing to participate rests, canvassing affected interests, subjection to a governing structure, and more recently the relations standing between the parties (Goodin, 2007; Fraser, 2008; Bengtson, 2026). A body of work on the scale of participatory institutions establishes, finally, that political equality, deliberation, and mass participation cannot be jointly maximized (Dahl & Tufte, 1973; Fishkin, 2009). These literatures settle a considerable proportion of the subject, and one purpose of this paper is to record how much; the survey below accordingly proceeds by conceding first and locating what remains afterwards.

The account offered here is developed within a framework the author has set out elsewhere, and which may be stated in a sentence:

> **Generative Relational Being.** *A theory of how subject, meaning, value, creation, and normativity co-emerge through generative relational processes.*

Two features of the framework bear on participation. Relations are treated as prior to the terms they relate, so that what a party is within a given field is constituted by the relations in which it stands; and relations are treated as generative, in that a relation in working order produces further determinations of meaning, of value, and of what the relation itself requires, that productive capacity being the framework's central concern. Applied to the present subject, these features suggest a reformulation. Participation may be understood as contribution to the production and reproduction of relational structures, with access to decisions as one form such contribution takes, and governance, on that understanding, as the institutional organization of participation so conceived. The reformulation is advanced as a working thesis and is stated with its provenance in §11, where the substantial debt it owes to existing social ontology is also recorded. The framework carries, further, a methodological commitment that governs how the claims below are advanced: its keynote is historical dialectics, so that propositions are entered as revisable within a historical frame, the finitude of knowledge and of practice is acknowledged as a standing condition, and philosophical argument is joined to operable formulation where the subject admits of it. A paper written under that commitment states its claims so that they may be given up.

This is a discussion paper, and its role is correspondingly limited. It identifies a structure, surveys what existing theory has made of it, marks where each account appears to run out, and proposes a direction for work; it does not complete a theory of participation justice, and several of its central propositions are entered as hypotheses awaiting examination. The survey is conducted in a conceding register, because the questions at issue are old and well worked,

and a substantial proportion of what a relational account might wish to claim has been claimed already, in vocabularies that the participation literature and the social-ontology literature do not always share; where a claim that might have been advanced here appears to be occupied, the relevant section says so and names the occupant. Three matters lie accordingly outside the undertaking. The paper offers no allocation formula, and §17 explains why none follows from the account; it does not adjudicate among deliberative, aggregative, and agonistic conceptions of democratic politics; and it leaves aside the empirical literature on participatory institutions, which would require methods the paper does not employ.

What the paper offers in their place may be set out as four contributions, claimed with differing degrees of confidence. The first is a mapping: the survey locates, with some precision, which questions in this area appear to be settled and which appear to remain open, and that mapping retains its value independently of whether the proposals below are accepted. The second is a hypothesis about the dimensions of participatory design, namely that the object of participation may constitute a dimension distinct from scope, mode, and authority, such that arrangements coinciding on the received dimensions may differ in ways bearing on their justice; §5 states the hypothesis and distinguishes it from the received three-dimensional account. The third is a proposed criterion, on which an arrangement may be assessed by whether it preserves the capacity of the affected relations to generate a further determination of the matter at issue; the proposal is advanced in §14 with its costs stated, and the paper's substantive contribution depends upon it. The fourth is an observation about form: the criterion proposed here shares its structure with criteria advanced in two companion papers on adjacent subjects, and the recurrence is offered as weak evidence for the form, with an alternative explanation of the convergence recorded alongside it. The questions set down in §18 are held to be the more valuable half of what is offered.

2 Scope and Method

2.1 The Containment Device

The literature bearing on participation is extensive, and a survey of it conducted without a principle of selection would amount to a bibliography. The device used here is the same one that organizes the discussion itself. Three questions are named at the outset, and material earns its place by discharging one of them:

(i) *Who participates.* On what ground does a party hold standing to take part.

(ii) *How they participate.* In what manner, at what intensity, and with what weight.

(iii) *What they participate in.* What is the object of the participation, and what determines it.

A fourth question emerges from the third and is treated separately from §11 onward: what

it is that a participatory arrangement is supposed to protect, and by what criterion a given arrangement is judged sufficient.

2.2 The Conceding Register

The register in which the survey is conducted was stated in §1 and its rationale belongs here. A theory whose components are individually unoriginal may still contribute through the manner in which it joins them, and the joining becomes visible only where the components are correctly attributed. The argument of this paper is architectural, and an architectural argument is weakened by any claim to have quarried its own stone.

One exclusion belongs with the others recorded in §1. The account does not extend to the question of whether non-human entities hold standing. That question is live, it bears directly on a relational ontology, and it is entered among the open questions of §18 for treatment there.

2.3 A Note on Sources

The survey draws on political theory, social ontology, development studies, public administration, environmental justice, and the literature on the commons. These fields cite one another unevenly, and one of the incidental findings of the survey is that the same structural point has been reached independently within several of them. Where that has occurred it is recorded, since convergence from unconnected directions is evidence of a kind.

3 The Received Picture of Participation

The picture this paper works against is not the position of any particular theorist. It is the default shape of the subject, visible in how participatory arrangements are designed and evaluated.

On that shape, participation is a relation between persons and decisions. There is a body that decides, there are persons upon whom the decision bears, and participation is the set of arrangements by which the second are given some purchase on the first. The arrangements vary in strength, from being told what has been decided, through being asked before it is decided, to deciding jointly. The evaluative question is how much purchase the arrangements afford, and the reformist impulse is to afford more.

Three features of this picture matter for what follows.

It is *episodic*. Participation occurs at moments, and the moments are decision points. Between them there is implementation, which is treated as execution, participation being regarded as complete by then, and there is ordinary institutional life, which the picture passes over.

It is *person-centred*. The unit is the individual or the group, characterized by interests, by being affected, or by holding a stake. The question of who participates is a question about

which persons, and the answers are principles for sorting persons.

The picture is, thirdly, *decision-terminal*. The value of participation is realized in the decision it influences. An arrangement that gave people extensive involvement in a process which then had no bearing on any decision would be judged, on this picture, a failure and possibly a manipulation.

Each feature is defensible and each has been defended. The paper's argument is that the three together confine the subject to a level at which the most consequential settlements have already been made.

4 The Taxonomic Tradition and the Grading of Participation

The question of *how* parties participate has been answered more thoroughly than either of the others, and the answers take the form of typologies ordered by intensity.

4.1 The Ladder and Its Successors

Arnstein (1969) supplies the founding statement, an eight-rung ladder grouped into three bands. The lowest band is not participation at all but manipulation and therapy, arrangements whose function is to secure assent. The middle band is tokenism, comprising informing, consultation, and placation, in which parties are heard without their being able to determine anything. The upper band is citizen power, comprising partnership, delegated power, and citizen control. The ladder's polemical force lies in its lower rungs: it names as non-participation a set of arrangements that describe themselves as participatory.

Later typologies preserve the ordering and refine the criteria. Pretty (1995) distinguishes passive participation, participation in information giving, participation by consultation, participation for material incentives, functional participation, interactive participation, and self-mobilization, ordered by the degree to which those participating control the agenda and the resources. White (1996) sorts arrangements by the interests they serve, distinguishing nominal participation, which confers display, from instrumental, representative, and transformative forms. The spectrum maintained by the International Association for Public Participation gives a five-level scale from informing through consulting, involving, and collaborating to empowering, and is widely used in administrative practice.

Cornwall (2008) supplies the critical survey of this family and makes an observation the present paper takes up. The typologies order intensity, and intensity is meaningless without an object. To ask how much control a party exercises is to invite the question control of what, and the typologies do not answer it.

4.2 The Three-Dimensional Turn

Fung (2006) breaks the single-scale form by decomposing participatory design into three di-

mensions, which he presents as a space within which any particular arrangement may be located. The dimensions are the scope of participation, concerning who takes part and how they are selected; the mode of communication and decision, concerning what participants do when assembled and how their contributions are aggregated; and the extent of authority, concerning how far the outcome of the process is linked to policy or public action.

The decomposition is a considerable advance on the ladder, and it addresses this paper's second question more fully than any other single source examined here. It also bears directly on the paper's framing, and the relation requires care. Section 5 states it.

4.3 Findings and Residue

Source	*Ordering principle*	*What it settles and leaves*
Ladder of citizen participation	Degree of citizen power over the outcome	Settles that participation is graded and that low grades may be counterfeit; leaves the object unspecified
Typology by control of agenda and resources	Control over process and means	Settles the material conditions of intensity; leaves the object unspecified
Typology by interests served	Whose interests the arrangement serves	Settles that intensity and purpose are separable; leaves the object unspecified
Five-level administrative spectrum	Commitment made by the convening body	Settles a practicable operational scale; leaves the object unspecified
Three-dimensional decomposition	Scope, mode, and authority jointly	Settles that design is multidimensional; treats the object as given

The family establishes that participation is graded, that the grades are separable from the purposes an arrangement serves, and that a single scale is insufficient to characterize a design. What it leaves is what Cornwall (2008) named: every ordering presupposes an object, and the object is treated throughout as given by the institutional setting.

5 The Three-Dimensional Decomposition and Its Third Member

This paper organizes its subject around three questions, and the organization requires a defence, because a reader familiar with Fung (2006) will observe that a three-dimensional decomposition of participation already exists.

5.1 The Relation to the Three-Dimensional Decomposition

The two decompositions agree on their first two members. Fung's scope of participation is the question of who takes part; his mode of communication and decision is the question of how. On these the present paper adds nothing and takes what that work established.

The third members differ, and the difference is the paper's occasion. Fung's third dimension is the extent of authority: how far the conclusions of a participatory process are linked to what is actually done. This is a question about the *weight* a contribution carries, and weight is a property of the manner of participating. A process whose conclusions bind and a process whose conclusions advise differ in how their participants participate, and the two arrangements may be identical in every other respect. On the classification used here, the extent of authority belongs to the second question.

The third question asked here is different. It concerns the *object*: what it is that participation is participation in. Two arrangements may be identical in scope, in mode, and in authority, and differ in that one confers binding authority over the selection of a contractor while the other confers binding authority over the definition of the problem the contract is meant to address. The second is a more consequential arrangement, and no combination of the three received dimensions distinguishes them, because the difference lies in the object over which the authority is held.

> **Hypothesis on the dimensions of design.** *The object of participation is a dimension of participatory design independent of scope, mode, and authority. Arrangements that coincide on the received dimensions may differ in what they are arrangements about, and the difference bears on the justice of the arrangement.*

5.2 Findings and Residue

This section has argued that the three questions organizing this paper differ from the three dimensions of the received decomposition, that the difference lies in the third member, and that the received third member appears to belong analytically to the second question. It leaves for §6 the question of whether the object has been theorized elsewhere under another description, and the answer given there is that it has been named repeatedly and theorized once, in a literature the participation typologies do not cite.

6 The Object of Participation

6.1 The Question Named

That the object matters has been observed by careful readers of the typologies. Cornwall (2008) makes the observation directly, holding that attention must be paid to who is participating, in what, and to whose benefit, and noting that the ladder invites the question of what exactly is being controlled. The observation is correct and it is made in passing, as a caution about the use of typologies, leaving the dimension itself unopened.

6.2 *Upstream Engagement*

One literature has pursued the question with sustained attention. Work on public engagement with science and technology has argued that engagement conducted at the point of regulatory approval arrives too late, since by then the research trajectory, the framing of the risks, and the range of alternatives under consideration have been settled. Wilsdon & Willis (2004) give the argument its slogan: engagement must move upstream, to the setting of research agendas and the framing of questions, and engagement confined to the assessment of finished proposals is engagement about the wrong object.

The argument concerns the object of participation directly, and it supports the point at issue here: that arrangements identical in intensity may differ in value according to what they are arrangements about, and that the objects available at a given moment are constrained by settlements already made upstream of it.

Two limits attend it for present purposes. It is developed for a particular institutional domain and generalizes only by analogy. It distinguishes upstream from downstream without supplying a general account of what the stream consists of, so that the number and character of the objects remain undetermined.

6.3 *The Policy Cycle and Its Uses*

Public administration supplies a standard sequence of agenda-setting, formulation, decision, implementation, and evaluation, and participatory practice has been mapped onto it. The mapping is useful and it is descriptive: the sequence records the stages an administrative process passes through, and it carries no claim about which stages bear the greater normative weight or about what determines the sequence.

6.4 *Findings and Residue*

The object of participation has been named as a question, pursued seriously within one domain, and mapped descriptively by another. What has not been supplied is a general account of the objects, of their ordering, and of why the ordering matters normatively. Section 7 takes up the one body of work that comes closest, and §13 states the account this paper offers.

7 Levels of Rules and Stage-Differentiated Participation

The claim that different parties may legitimately participate at different points, and that the points differ in kind as well as in sequence, has been made with precision in the study of common-pool resource governance. This section concedes that priority and states what remains.

7.1 The Three Levels of Rules

Ostrom (1990, 2005) distinguishes three levels at which rules operate and at which choices about rules are made. Operational rules govern day-to-day activity: who may take what, when, under what conditions, and with what monitoring. Collective-choice rules govern how operational rules are made and altered, and by whom. Constitutional rules govern how collective-choice rules are made and altered. The levels are nested, each supplying the terms within which the level below is settled.

The design principles that accompany this framework include one that bears directly on the present subject. Among the conditions associated with enduring self-governed commons is that most of the individuals affected by the operational rules can participate in modifying those rules. The principle states a stage-differentiated participation requirement: standing at the operational level does not by itself confer standing at the collective-choice level, and the enduring arrangements are those in which the two are connected.

7.2 The Concession

The consequence for this paper should be stated plainly. The claim that participation must be differentiated by the level of the object, that participation in rule-application and participation in rule-making are different things with different requirements, and that the legitimacy of an arrangement depends on how the levels are connected, is established. It is established with an empirical base this paper does not have, and in a form that has been tested against a large body of cases.

Any account that presented stage-differentiation as a discovery would be mistaken, and a reviewer would be right to say so.

7.3 The Residue

Three things are left, and they are what §13 takes up.

The three levels are levels of *rules*. They differentiate the object by its position in a hierarchy of rule-making authority, which is the correct differentiation for a framework whose subject is institutional analysis. It is not obviously the correct differentiation for a subject whose object includes activities that are not rule-making at all: the formation of a shared purpose, the identification of what is at stake, the framing of a problem, the assessment of what has occurred. These are objects of participation and they are not levels of rules.

The framework is descriptive and diagnostic. The design principle records a condition associated with endurance, which is a finding about what survives. Whether an arrangement lacking that condition is *unjust*, as distinct from fragile, is a question the framework does not pose, and the inference from endurance to legitimacy is one this paper declines for reasons given in §14.

The framework further takes the boundary of the resource system and its appropriator community as broadly given. The question of who counts as affected, which §8 shows to be the hardest question in the vicinity, is not the question institutional analysis of the commons was designed to answer.

7.4 Findings and Residue

This section records that stage-differentiated participation is settled ground, that the nesting of rule levels supplies its most developed form, and that the connection between levels is associated with the endurance of self-governed arrangements. It leaves the differentiation of objects that are not rules, the question of whether the associated conditions are conditions of justice, and the determination of the affected community.

8 Principles of Inclusion and the Boundary Problem

The first question, who participates, has a literature of its own in democratic theory, and it is the literature this paper's thesis most nearly touches. The concession made in this section is the largest in the paper.

8.1 The Problem of the Boundary

A democratic procedure decides matters for a body of persons, and the procedure cannot itself determine who belongs to that body without presupposing an answer. Any vote on the composition of the electorate must be taken by some electorate. The difficulty is structural and it has been recognized as the boundary problem, or the problem of constituting the demos.

The difficulty is not merely technical. Where the boundary falls determines what the procedure can decide and whose situation is registered within it, so a procedure impeccable by every internal standard may produce systematically defective outcomes because it was drawn around the wrong set.

8.2 All Affected Interests

The most widely canvassed answer holds that those whose interests are affected by a decision hold a claim to take part in it. Goodin (2007) gives the principle its most careful modern statement and draws out its difficulty: taken strictly, the set of persons whose interests are affected by a given decision is indefinitely large and remains indeterminate in advance of the decision, since what is decided determines whom it affects. The principle as stated tends toward either enfranchising everyone in everything or requiring a prior determination that the principle was introduced to supply.

8.3 All Subjected

Fraser (2005, 2008) advances a different ground. Standing derives from being jointly subject to a governance structure, so that those who are ruled by a given structure hold a claim to participate in its determination, whether or not they are members of the polity that formally administers it. The argument is developed against a background claim that this paper's §16 takes up separately: that the question of the frame is prior to questions of distribution, and that misframing is a distinct form of injustice.

8.4 Relational Grounds

A recent line of work grounds inclusion in relational egalitarianism. Anderson (1999) and Kolodny (2014) develop accounts on which the point of equality concerns the character of the relations in which persons stand to one another, and on which democratic arrangements are justified by the relational condition they constitute. Building on that ground, Bengtson (2026) argues directly that neither being affected nor being subjected is the fundamental basis of democratic inclusion, and that what explains inclusion is standing in a relation.

This paper must record that the move it makes in §13, from asking which persons are affected to asking which relations are at stake, has been made in the democratic inclusion literature on independent grounds, and made recently and explicitly. Any presentation of that move as novel would be incorrect.

8.5 Findings and Residue

This section records that the ground of standing is contested and well worked, that the all-affected principle faces a determinacy difficulty, that subjection to a structure is a developed alternative, and that a relational ground has been advanced and defended. What is left for this paper is narrower than the thesis of §1 might have suggested, and §12 narrows it further before §14 states what survives.

9 The Trilemma of Participation

An account of participation justice must say something about the conditions under which participation is organized, and the conditions include an obstruction that no arrangement escapes.

9.1 The Obstruction Stated

Arrangements that admit everyone to everything are unavailable at any scale beyond the smallest. Arrangements that select a subset introduce a distinction between those who take part and those on whose behalf they take part, which is a hierarchy however it is constituted. Arrange-

ments that assign determination to those with the competence to determine well purchase quality at the cost of the standing of everyone else.

9.2 The Concession

The obstruction is named and theorized. Fishkin (2009) presents it as a trilemma among political equality, deliberation, and mass participation, holding that arrangements securing any two will characteristically sacrifice the third. Dahl & Tufte (1973) establish the underlying tension between the scale of a unit and the effective participation available within it. Michels (1911) states the tendency of representative organizations toward oligarchy as a law of their operation. The contemporary literature on selected mini-publics is a sustained argument about the same obstruction, with Landemore (2020) defending arrangements built on random selection and Lafont (2020) objecting that empowering a selected few short-circuits the deliberation of the many.

No claim to have discovered this obstruction is available.

9.3 The Residue

What the trilemma literature settles is that the obstruction is real and that the three desiderata cannot be jointly maximized. What it does not settle is what follows normatively. A trilemma is a constraint on design, and a constraint on design does not by itself yield a criterion for judging designs. The question that remains is what a participatory arrangement is required to preserve, given that it cannot admit everyone to everything, and that question is the paper's, taken up in §14.

10 Participation as an Object of Justice

Two prior usages must be distinguished before the paper's own term is introduced.

10.1 The Restorative Usage

Participatory justice is an established term in the theory of restorative practices, where it names arrangements in which those affected by a wrong take part in determining its resolution, in contrast with arrangements in which professionals determine it on their behalf. Christie (1977) supplies the founding argument, on which conflicts are a form of property that professional institutions take from the parties to whom they belong. This usage is well established and a reader encountering the phrase will ordinarily assume it.

10.2 The Environmental Usage

In environmental justice, participation figures as one of several dimensions. Schlosberg (2007) sets out an account on which distribution, recognition, and participation are interdependent, each implicated in the others, and none reducible to the rest. Participation on this account is a dimension of justice coordinate with the others.

10.3 The Term Used Here

The term used in this paper differs from both. It does not concern the resolution of particular wrongs, and it does not name one dimension among several coordinate dimensions. It concerns the standing to contribute to the reproduction of relational structures, and §16 argues that it stands in a particular relation to the other dimensions of justice. Where the phrase is used below it carries that sense, and the two prior usages are not intended.

11 The Ontological Turn

The survey to this point has conceded much of what a relational account might have claimed. The typologies settle the second question, the levels of rules settle the differentiation of rule-objects, the inclusion literature has already reached a relational ground, and the trilemma is named. This section states the reformulation from which the paper's contribution follows, and §12 immediately states how much of it is owed to others.

11.1 The Generative Relational Framework

The framework was stated in §1 and its two relevant features may be recalled. Relations are treated as prior to the terms they relate, so that what a party is within a given field is constituted by the relations in which it stands. Relations are treated, further, as generative, in that a relation in working order produces further determinations of meaning, of value, and of what the relation itself requires.

The second feature carries the weight in what follows. If the productive capacity of a relation is the framework's central concern, then arrangements bearing on relations will be assessed by what they do to that capacity, and §14 draws out the consequence.

11.2 The Reformulation

On the received picture set out in §3, participation is a relation between persons and decisions. The reformulation proposed here is that participation is a relation between positioned parties and the ongoing production of the structure that positions them.

A structure of relations does not persist of its own accord. It is produced and reproduced by the activity of the parties within it: by the occupancy of positions, by the performance of

the activity those positions carry, by the application of categories to cases until the categories settle, by the meeting or disappointing of expectations, and by the transmission of all of this to those who occupy the positions next. A field of relations is therefore continually being remade, and the remaking is done by activity distributed across every position in it.

Participation, on this account, is contribution to that remaking. It occurs wherever a party's activity bears on whether and how a relation is sustained, altered, or ended, and it is accordingly wider in extent than access to decisions. A teacher conducting a class contributes to the reproduction of an educational relation. An officer applying a category to a case contributes to the reproduction of the category. A party who declines to contest a determination contributes to the settling of it.

> **Working definition.** *A party participates in a relational structure to the extent that its activity bears on the production, maintenance, transformation, or dissolution of the relations composing that structure.*

11.3 A Qualification the Account Requires

The formulation invites a misreading that must be closed off. To say that parties participate in the production of relations is not to say that any party produces a relation, since a relation is not the sort of thing an individual makes. Relations emerge from interaction and are sustained by it, and what a party contributes is activity that enters the interaction.

The qualification matters because it locates where the normative question arises. If relations were made by parties severally, the question would be one of ownership. Because they emerge from interaction, the question is one of access to the interaction: which parties are positioned to contribute to the emergence, in what manner, with what weight, and with what capacity to alter what emerges. Institutions determine these things, and that determination is the object of participation justice.

11.4 The Consequence for Governance

Governance follows from this as a special case, having been the primary subject on the received picture.

> **Working definition, consequent on the above.** *Governance is the institutional organization of participation in relational production and reproduction.*

Laws, markets, associations, professional bodies, and constitutions are on this reading different mechanisms for organizing who may contribute to the reproduction of which relations, in what manner, and with what authority. The vocabulary of decisions and procedures describes

one family of such mechanisms and describes it well. What it does not describe is the larger volume of relational reproduction that occurs outside decision points, which determines what the decisions can be about.

12 Relation to Prior Relational and Structurational Ontologies

The reformulation of §11 is, considered as ontology, substantially the property of others. This section says whose, and states what is left.

12.1 Positioned Practice

The closest prior account is the transformational model of social activity developed within critical realism. Bhaskar (1979) holds that a society does not consist of individuals but expresses the sum of the relations within which individuals stand, that social structure consists of internally related positions which persons come to occupy, and that society is at once the ever-present condition of human activity and its continually reproduced outcome. The positions are illustrated by paired relational terms of exactly the kind this paper has in view.

Set beside the claims of §11, the overlap is close to total on the ontological side. That structures consist of positions, that persons participate by occupying and performing them, and that structures are reproduced and transformed through that performance, is stated there.

12.2 Structuration and Its Critics

Giddens (1984) advances the duality of structure, on which structure is both the medium and the outcome of the practices it recursively organizes, so that the same activity by which agents act is the activity by which the structural conditions of action are reproduced. Archer (1995) objects that the formulation conflates structure and agency by treating them as inseparable moments, and proposes an analytical dualism in which structural conditioning, social interaction, and structural elaboration are separated in time, distinguishing reproduction from transformation as morphostasis from morphogenesis.

That dispute matters to the present subject in one respect. If reproduction and transformation are temporally separable, then a participatory arrangement may be assessed by which of the two it makes possible, and the assessment can be made without deciding the dispute.

12.3 Relational Sociology

Emirbayer (1997) argues for taking relations as the units of social analysis in place of substances, and Donati & Archer (2015) develop an account on which relations possess emergent properties and causal powers of their own, and on which parties within a relation may act as

a collective subject. The latter connects relational ontology to the analysis of associations and civil society, which is the nearest existing approach to the institutional questions of this paper.

12.4 Reproduction as a Critical Category

A distinct tradition treats reproduction as its central category. Work in social reproduction theory examines the activity by which the conditions of a social order are continually remade, much of it unremunerated and institutionally unregistered, and argues that its exclusion from the categories of political economy is itself a structural feature (Bhattacharya, 2017). The relevance here is direct: the claim that participation in reproduction occurs largely outside the sites that institutions recognize as participatory has been argued at length within that literature, on different grounds and with a different object.

12.5 Self-Reproducing Systems

Luhmann (1995) treats social systems as reproducing themselves through the recursive production of their own elements, so that a system's continuation is an achievement of its own operations. The account supplies a rigorous statement of self-reproduction and locates the reproducing operations in communication, and it is entered here because any claim about relational reproduction stands in its shadow.

12.6 The Residue Stated Exactly

The ontology of §11 is not the paper's contribution. What is left, after the above is conceded, is a conjunction that the survey did not find made:

> **The residue, stated as a conjecture.** *The ontology of positioned practice has not been joined to a normative theory of standing to participate. The accounts that supply the ontology do not ask who legitimately contributes to reproduction, and the accounts that ask who legitimately participates do not ground the answer in positioned practice. The joining is what this paper attempts.*

The gap can be stated more precisely by taking the four nearest positions in turn. The transformational model supplies positions and reproduction and advances no principle of inclusion. The relational ground for democratic inclusion advanced in Bengtson (2026) supplies a principle of inclusion and grounds it in relational egalitarianism, which concerns the quality of relations among persons, leaving aside the occupancy of positions within a reproducing structure. The all-subjected principle grounds standing in being ruled by a structure, which is a relation of subjection to a structure, distinct from a position within its production. Relational sociology, for its part, supplies emergent relational properties and a collective subject without a theory of who holds standing to determine what the relation becomes.

Whether the joining is of value is a question for the reader, and §17 enters the reasons for doubt.

13 The Reformulation of Standing, Mode, and Object

With the ontology in place the three questions may be restated. Each restatement modifies an existing answer.

13.1 The Ground of Standing

The received question asks which persons hold a claim to take part. The reformulated question asks which relational positions are implicated in the reproduction at issue, and treats persons as holding standing in virtue of occupying such a position.

The difference from the all-affected principle is that affectedness is an outcome of a determination while occupancy of a position is a condition obtaining before it, which addresses the determinacy difficulty Goodin (2007) identifies without resolving it. The difference from the all-subjected principle is that subjection is a relation to a governing structure while occupancy is a location within the structure being reproduced, so that parties whose activity sustains a relation hold standing in respect of it even where they are not governed by the body in question.

The reformulation carries a cost stated here and returned to in §17. Determining which positions a given structure comprises is itself an interpretive act, performed by somebody, and the account supplies no procedure for it. The determinacy difficulty is thereby displaced, and it survives the displacement.

13.2 The Forms of Contribution

The received question asks at what intensity parties participate, and the received answers order intensities on a scale. The reformulated question asks what forms of contribution to relational reproduction an arrangement admits.

The intensity scale is retained, since intensity is a real property of arrangements and the typologies of §4 order it well. What is added is that contribution takes forms the scale does not register, because the scale was built for decision access. Sustaining a relation by performing its ordinary activity is a contribution. Withholding performance is a contribution. Transmitting a category to those who will apply it next is a contribution, and one that no participatory instrument addresses.

13.3 The Moments of Reproduction

The received question is not asked, and where it is asked the object is taken as given by the institutional setting. The reformulated question asks which moment of relational reproduction the participation bears upon.

The moments proposed are these: the formation of a shared purpose; the framing of what is at issue; the identification of what is at stake and for whom; the construction of the rules and equivalences by which the field is ordered; determination in particular cases; the carrying out of what is determined; the assessment of what has occurred; and the revision of the ordering in light of it.

Three cautions attend the list. It is offered as a proposal awaiting examination. The ordering carries no temporal implication, since the moments recur and overlap and a field is ordinarily engaged in several at once. The ordering carries no implication of relative importance either, since a defect at any moment appears to propagate to the others.

13.4 Findings and Residue

This section proposes reformulations of the three questions and states the cost of the first. It leaves the criterion by which an arrangement is to be judged sufficient, which is the subject of the section following, and the operationalization of position-identification, which is entered among the open questions.

14 Generativity as the Criterion of Sufficient Participation

The survey established that participation is graded, that its objects differ, that standing is contested, and that no arrangement admits everyone to everything. What none of it supplies is an answer to the question a designer actually faces: given that a choice must be made, how much participation, of what kind, at which moment, is enough. This section proposes an answer. It is the paper's contribution and it is stated with its costs.

14.1 The Criterion

> **Proposed criterion of generative sufficiency.** *A participatory arrangement is sufficient in respect of a given moment of relational reproduction when it preserves the capacity of the affected relations to generate a further determination of that moment. It is unjust when it extinguishes that capacity, whether or not any party was excluded from any decision.*

The criterion asks a question about capacity, treating access as instrumental to it. An arrangement may admit every affected party to every decision and still fail it, if what results is a

determination that no party can subsequently reopen. An arrangement may admit few and still satisfy it, if the determinations it produces remain open to a further determination by the relations they bear upon. What is protected is the continuing productive capacity of the relational structure, and access is instrumental to that.

14.2 The Ground of the Criterion

The criterion derives from the framework, and its ground lies there. If relations are generative, and if what a relation produces includes the determinations by which it is itself ordered, then a relation whose capacity to produce further determinations has been extinguished has been damaged in the respect most essential to it. The wrong so identified attaches to the structure, which has been rendered unable to continue producing what it exists to produce. A party's exclusion from a particular proceeding is a distinct matter, and on this account a lesser one.

One consequence follows, and it explains why the criterion is not a proxy for inclusion. A party excluded from a determination retains standing to reopen it, provided the arrangement leaves the question open. Exclusion from an episode admits of recovery, whereas extinction of the capacity to reopen appears to admit of none. The criterion accordingly ranks the two harms in a way that access-based accounts appear unable to, and it offers an explanation of why some highly inclusive arrangements may be worse than some sparse ones.

14.3 The Relation to the Trilemma

The criterion does not resolve the trilemma of §9 and it changes what the trilemma requires. On an access-based account, every departure from universal participation is a shortfall to be justified, and the trilemma is accordingly a permanent embarrassment. On the criterion offered here, a departure from universal participation is unobjectionable in itself, and what must be shown is that the arrangement leaves the relations able to generate a further determination. Selection is compatible with that. What is incompatible is a selected arrangement whose determinations are final in the strong sense, since the selection has then fixed the field's ordering beyond the reach of those it orders.

The criterion yields a design orientation, stated as a corollary: the intensity of participation required at a moment rises with the finality of what is determined there. Moments whose determinations are readily revisited require less; moments whose determinations settle the terms of subsequent moments require more.

14.4 The Relation to Endurance

Section 7 noted that the commons literature associates connected rule levels with the endurance of self-governed arrangements, and declined the inference from endurance to legitimacy. The ground of that refusal can now be given.

Endurance is a property of a configuration's capacity to absorb disturbance, and it carries no evaluative content. An arrangement that has extinguished the capacity of its relations to generate further determinations may endure for a long time and may endure longer than one that has not, since it has fewer live claims to answer. The criterion offered here is therefore not a prediction of stability and must not be read as one. It states a condition on the relation, and the relation between that condition and the persistence of the arrangement is contingent and is treated in the companion work on historical dynamics.

14.5 The Family of Criteria

The criterion has a sibling. In a companion paper on the interpretation of organizational rules, an interpretation is held unjust when it extinguishes the capacity of the relation between interpreter and interpreted party to generate a further interpretation of the same question (Huang, in preparation, a). In a companion paper on value conversion, a conversion is held unjust when the party against whom an equivalence is asserted can no longer contest that the equivalence holds (Huang, in preparation, b).

The three criteria share a form. In each, an act is assessed by what it does to the capacity of a relation to produce a further determination of the matter the act settled. The recurrence is offered as weak evidence for the form, on the ground that a criterion reached independently in three domains is more likely to be tracking something than one constructed for a single case. It is weak evidence because the three were developed by one author within one framework, and a shared origin is an alternative explanation of the convergence.

14.6 Findings and Residue

This section states the criterion, grounds it in the framework, distinguishes it from access, relates it to the trilemma without resolving it, refuses the inference from endurance, and records its siblings. What it leaves is the largest of the paper's debts: no procedure is offered by which the generative capacity of a relation may be assessed in a given case, and §17 enters this as the account's principal weakness.

15 The Matrix of Participation

The criterion applies moment by moment, and applying it yields a table. The table is offered as an illustration of the criterion's use.

Moment	*Positions implicated*	*Mode indicated*	*What generative sufficiency requires*
Formation of purpose	The full range of positions the structure will order	Deliberative	That the purpose remain open to restatement by those it comes to order
Framing of the issue	Positions whose situation the framing renders visible or invisible	Co-framing	That an unregistered situation retain a route into the frame
Identification of stakes	Positions holding the values at issue	Dialogue	That plural statements of stake survive without premature unification
Construction of orderings	Positions the ordering will bind, with those competent in its operation	Co-construction	That the ordering remain revisable by those it binds
Determination in cases	Positions party to the case	Reasoned determination	That the determination not close the question for later cases
Carrying out	Positions performing and receiving	Execution with report	That performance discrepancies reach the ordering
Assessment	Positions bearing the effects	Feedback with standing	That an adverse assessment be capable of reaching revision
Revision of orderings	The full range of bound positions	Participatory review	That revision be reachable without the consent of those it would constrain

Three observations follow from the table.

First, the fourth column carries the section's contribution. The first three columns restate distinctions available in the literature surveyed above. The fourth states, for each moment, what the criterion of §14 requires there, and it appears to be the only column that could not be filled from the received accounts.

Second, the requirements in the fourth column are conditions on capacity, expressed without thresholds of inclusion. None of them specifies a quantity of participation. Each specifies something that must remain possible.

Third, the moment of determination in particular cases occupies a single row. The interpretation of rules in particular cases, which the companion paper treats at length, is one moment among eight. That paper's subject is therefore a specialized case of the present one, and the relation between the two is stated in the section following.

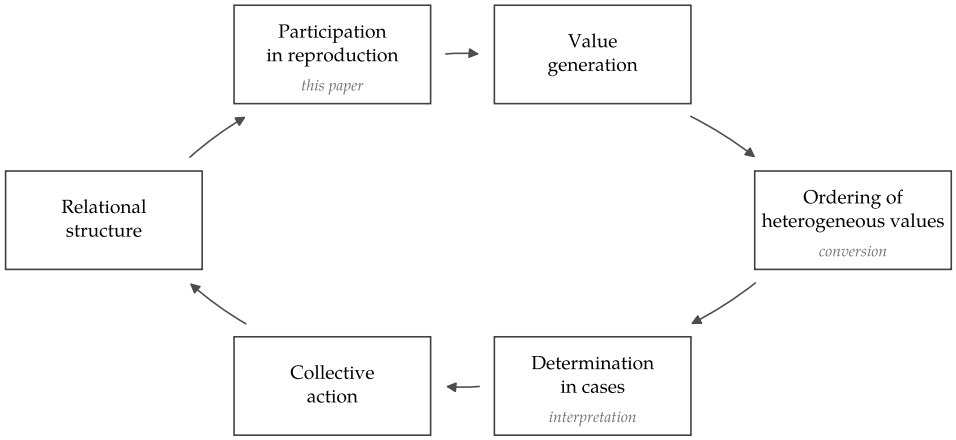

Figure 1: The circuit within which the account sits. Participation justice governs the terms on which positioned parties contribute to the reproduction of a relational structure; the structure generates values; the ordering of heterogeneous values is the subject of the companion work on conversion; the application of that ordering to cases is the subject of the companion work on interpretation; and the resulting action remakes the structure. The figure records the relations among the papers and asserts no temporal sequence, since the moments recur and overlap.

16 The Place of the Account in the Generative Relational Corpus

16.1 The Cycle

The account completes a circuit that the companion papers enter at different points. Relational structures position parties. The arrangements by which those parties may contribute to reproducing the structure are the subject of this paper. What the structure produces includes values, which are generated within relations. Heterogeneous values require ordering if collective action is to be possible, and the terms on which they are ordered are the subject of the companion work on value conversion. The application of those terms to particular cases is the subject of the companion work on interpretation. What is determined issues in action, and action remakes the relations from which the circuit began.

16.2 The Priority Claim and Its Standing

The circuit invites a conclusion that participation justice is foundational and that the other dimensions of justice presuppose it. That conclusion should be resisted in its strong form and stated carefully in its weak one.

The strong form would hold that questions of distribution, procedure, and interpretation

cannot be posed until standing to participate has been settled. That claim is close to an argument already in the literature. Fraser (2005, 2008) holds that the question of the frame is prior to questions of what is owed within it, that misframing is a distinct injustice, and that theories of justice have lacked the resources to reflect on the frame. A relational restatement of that argument would be a restatement, and it would inherit the objections the original has attracted.

The weak form is what this paper asserts. The moments are interdependent, and a defect at any of them propagates to the others, which is the position taken on the analogous question in environmental justice by Schlosberg (2007). What the circuit adds is the specific direction of propagation: a defect in participation at the moment of ordering appears downstream as an interpretive question that no party can raise, and the interpretive injustice is then the visible form of a participatory defect that occurred earlier and elsewhere. This is a claim about how the moments connect, leaving the question of priority open.

16.3 Findings and Residue

This section sets out the circuit, states the relation among the companion papers, and declines the strong priority claim while advancing a weaker one about propagation. It leaves the strong claim to those willing to defend it against the objections that the framing argument has already met.

17 The Limits of the Account

The account is now complete enough to be priced.

No operational form. The criterion turns on the capacity of a relation to generate a further determination, and no procedure is offered by which that capacity may be assessed. What would count as evidence that a moment remains open, who would assess it, and against what baseline, are unsettled. A criterion in that condition is a proposal for work, and this is the account's principal weakness.

No allocation formula. The criterion states a condition and does not distribute participation. Told that an arrangement must preserve generative capacity, a designer with a fixed budget of attention and a large field of positions still has every practical question before them. The matrix of §15 illustrates the criterion and does not decide such questions.

The determinacy difficulty is displaced. Standing derives from occupying a position in a structure, and which positions a structure comprises is settled by an interpretive act performed by somebody. The account thereby reproduces at one remove the difficulty it identified in the all-affected principle, and it has no better answer than that literature does.

The ontology is borrowed. As §12 states, the ontological content of the reformulation belongs to the tradition of positioned practice. What is offered here is a joining, and a reader who

judges the joining insubstantial will find little else.

The relational ground has been reached already. The move from affected persons to implicated relations has been made within democratic theory on independent grounds. This paper's version grounds the relation in positioned practice, where the prior account grounds it in relational equality, and whether that difference carries weight is a question this paper cannot settle in its own favour.

The breadth of the objects exceeds their treatment. The eight moments of §13 are proposed, and their establishment is outstanding. A different analysis would yield a different list, and nothing here shows the list to be complete or the divisions to be at the joints.

Against this the paper claims two things. The criterion of §14 states, first, a condition on participatory arrangements that the surveyed accounts appear not to state, and it does so in a form that offers an explanation of why inclusive arrangements can be worse than sparse ones. The survey, second, locates with some precision where the residue appears to lie, which retains its value independently of whether the criterion is accepted, since it spares a subsequent inquiry the same reconnaissance.

18 Open Questions

This paper identifies a neglected structure. It does not complete a theory of it, and the questions below are held to be the more valuable part of what is offered.

If the structure is real, the following questions arise immediately.

The first group concerns standing.

Q1. By what procedure are the positions comprising a structure identified? The account grounds standing in occupancy and supplies no method for determining what is occupied. Whether the determination can be made by any party other than one already positioned, and what follows if it cannot, is open.

Q2. Does occupancy admit of degrees? A party whose activity bears heavily on the reproduction of a relation and a party whose activity bears on it faintly both occupy positions, and whether standing varies with the weight of the bearing, or is a threshold property, is unsettled.

Q3. What standing attaches to positions that no living party occupies? Positions that have been vacated, positions that will be occupied by parties not yet existing, and positions from which the occupants were removed by the ordering at issue, are all implicated in reproduction, and the account as stated does not address them.

The second group concerns modes and objects.

Q4. Are the moments of relational reproduction enumerable? The eight proposed here are a proposal. Whether a principled enumeration exists, whether the divisions fall at joints, and whether the set is domain-invariant, are open.

Q5. What forms of contribution does the intensity scale fail to register? The account holds that sustaining a relation by ordinary performance is a contribution, and no participatory instrument addresses it. What an instrument addressing it would look like is unknown.

Q6. Can withholding be treated as participation without absurdity? Declining to perform, declining to contest, and exiting are all contributions to what a relation becomes, and whether a theory of participation justice should carry them is unsettled.

The third group concerns the criterion, and the questions here are the sharpest because the claims are the strongest.

Q7. What evidence bears on whether a moment remains open? The criterion is applied with confidence in retrospect, once a question has visibly failed to be reopened over a long period. Applying it prospectively, at the time an arrangement is designed, is what would be useful, and it remains unsupplied.

Q8. Can generative capacity be traded across moments? Whether a deficit at one moment may be compensated by surplus at another, or whether the criterion applies moment by moment without offset, determines how much practical guidance the account can carry, and it remains unsettled here.

Q9. Does the criterion have a lower bound? Preserving the capacity to generate a further determination is compatible with arrangements that preserve it barely. Whether the criterion requires more than bare preservation, and if so on what ground, is open.

The last question is the one the account is directed toward, and it is placed last because everything above bears on it.

Q10. Under what institutional and relational conditions does a structure retain the capacity to reproduce itself generatively across changes of occupancy? Positions turn over, categories settle into usage, and arrangements drift toward finality under the ordinary pressure that decision-making generates. An arrangement that satisfied the criterion when designed may fail it a generation later with no act of foreclosure by anyone. What sustains generative capacity across time is the question on which the practical value of the account depends, and it is entirely open.

A closing observation about the shape of the list. The questions of the first two groups could be pursued within existing disciplines, and several are being pursued there under other descriptions. The questions of the third group could not, since they concern a criterion advanced here. A reader who finds the survey useful and the criterion unpersuasive may take the first and leave the second, since the survey's findings about where the residue lies do not depend on the criterion being correct. The reverse is not available: the criterion is a proposal about what participation is for, and it requires the reformulation of §11 to say what it is a criterion about.

A note on method. No formal apparatus has been used. The criterion of §14 could be written in the notation of dynamical systems, with a relational structure answering to a configuration and generative capacity to a property of its trajectory, and the companion work on historical dynamics does something of this kind. Written out here, such a model would derive nothing the prose does not state and would supply an appearance of precision the argument has not earned. The conditions under which the notation would become honest are set out in Q7 through Q9, and they have not been met.

A note on the survey. The literatures drawn on here cite one another unevenly, and several of the convergences recorded above were found in the course of the survey and were not known at the outset. Where a source has been read at second hand this has been avoided in the claims that bear weight, but the risk of misattribution in a survey of this width is real, and correction is welcome.

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